SUPPORTING AFGHAN NGOs IN A FLUID ENVIRONMENT

Final Report to
International Rescue Committee
Rural Assistance Program

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The following report and recommendations to IRC/RAP are based upon information gathered by the consultant through analysis of questionnaires received from Afghan NGOs; interviews with donors, informants and Afghan NGO leadership; and supplemental reading. They are the consultant's assessment and analysis of attitudes and conditions affecting Afghan NGOs and donor agencies during Spring and early Summer 1994.

SCOPE OF WORK

The task designated in the Scope of Work was to:

1. Design and conduct a study of thirty-five Afghan NGOs with headquarters in the Peshawar area;

2. Develop, for internal RAP review, thirty-five comprehensive organization profiles;

3. Prepare for each of the thirty-five Afghan NGOs identified in the study, profiles for general distribution to RAP donors;

4. Improve RAP's capacity to select appropriate implementing partners and to improve donor knowledge of Afghan NGOs working for Afghan rehabilitation.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

A total of thirty six Afghan NGOs were identified as well as two umbrella groups of NGOs.

A comprehensive survey questionnaire was designed to:

1) Gather basic historical and organizational data;
2) Provide a basis for assessing internal management;
3) Provide a basis for assessing program design and implementation.

The questionnaire was distributed to thirty-six selected NGOs. Of the thirty-six distributed, thirty-four were returned.

Profiles were developed for twenty-four Afghan NGOs based upon the questionnaires and interviews with the agencies and donors. The questionnaire and interview data was also entered into ARIES to enable easy access to information through the RAP Network as well as to allow for systematic updating of information.[1]

The following profiles are attached.

1.	AAID	Afghan Agency for Integrated Development
2.	ACA	Abady Construction Agency
3.	ADAg	Afghan Development Agency
4.	ADA	Afghan Development Association
5.	AG-TTP	Afghan German TTP
6.	AHDS	Afghan Health and Development Service
7.	AMNA	Creation d'Ecoles Pilotes en Afghanistan
8.	APA	Afghan Planning Agency
9.	ARCAR	Ariana Rehabilitation Committee for Afghanistan
10.	AREA	Agency for Rehabilitation and Energy Conservation in Afghanistan
11.	ARO	Afghan Rehabilitation Organization
12.	ARR	Afghan Relief and Rehabilitation
13.	AWRC	Afghan Women's Resource Center
14.	AWWO	Afghan Women's Welfare Organization
15.	BEFARe	Basic Education for Afghan Refugees
16.	CAWC	Central Afghanistan Welfare Committee
17.	CBR	Consultant Bureau for Reconstruction
18.	HAFO	Helping Afghan Farmers Organization
19.	MMC	Mujahid Emergency Medical Center
20.	RAFA	Reconstruction Authority for Afghanistan
21.	RDA	Reconstruction and Rural Development for Afghanistan

1 Three questionnaires were not returned in time to be included in the interviewing and profiling process: AACRP, Afghan Agriculture, Construction and Rehabilitation Project; ACRD, Afghan Center for Rural Development; and ADS, Afghan Disabled Society.

The four questionnaires not returned were: AAA, Afghan Aid Association; ARDP; Afghan Rehabilitation and Development Program; COAR, Coordination of Afghan Relief; and ESAR, Engineering Services for Afghanistan Reconstruction.

21. RDA Reconstruction and Rural Development for Afghanistan
22. SJAWO Sayed Jamaluddin Afghani Welfare Organization
23. VAT Village Assistance Team
24. WROR Welfare and Relief Organization for Reconstruction

Five NGOs were interviewed by project assistant.

1. ACRU Ariana Construction and Rehabilitation Unit
   Status: pending
2. NPO Norwegian Project Office
   Status: profile written
3. PRB Pamir Reconstruction Bureau
   Status: profile written
4. START Short Term Assistance for Rehabilitation Team
   Status: pending
5. WOR Welfare Organization for Relief
   Status: pending

The following donor agencies were interviewed by the consultant:

1. UNDP -- Mike Mersereau
2. FAO engineering -- Ian Anderson
3. WFP -- Klaus Klawitter
4. Swedish Committee (education) -- Barbara Peterson

The project was accomplished in spite of the constraints of being undertaken and implemented during Ramazan and two long Eid holidays during which time personnel at Afghan NGOs were either unavailable or working at low levels of operation.

In addition, the project assistant who was originally to undertake fifty per cent of the interviews, data processing and analysis was not available.

The profiles attached are a first effort for evaluating Afghan NGOs. The long term value of the profiles as a tool for determining good implementing partners is in direct relation to the success with which the following is collected and incorporated into the data base and the profiles:

1. Evaluations from other donors

2. Monitoring reports from RAP monitors

THE EVOLUTION OF AFGHAN NGOs

The conditions in Afghanistan which gave impetus to establishing Afghan NGOs in Pakistan to implement relief and rehabilitation activities across border have led to a situation deemed by many as out of control. The situation is problematical not only for donors but also for Afghan groups struggling to survive by vying for increasingly limited funds.

In a period of less than five years, an estimated 200 NGOs were started between Peshawar and Quetta. Many of these NGOs are "hip pocket operations" -- individuals seeking jobs almost hand to mouth in small scale projects funded by foreign donors. Others (limited in number) have evolved into sophisticated operations with deep inroads into funding sources, complex organizational systems both inside and outside of Afghanistan, and remarkable facility to deal with Western "NGO nuances". The rest fall in the middle, groups of people who joined together because of early professional, regional, religious and/or political ties and have learned enough to grow and sustain themselves sufficiently -- if often marginally -- over time.

The proliferation of NGOs, the reduction in funding, and increased monitoring of projects by ex-expatriate donors in Afghanistan, has led to the desire to impose some controls on the situation. Clearly, not all NGOs can be carried financially. Some should not be supported at all.

It is not necessary to this report to discuss or analyze the short-term thinking on the part of donors which led to the present situation. It is important, however, to describe the existing environment in which donors and Afghan NGOs are operating in order to give context to the recommendations to RAP for:

1. Selecting appropriate implementing partners;

2. Providing training and support to Afghan NGOs to increase and improve their capacities to operate effectively;

3. Improving donor knowledge in general about working with Afghan NGOs.

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF AFGHAN NGOs

For the most part, the term, Afghan NGO, is a misnomer. It was adopted to meet a donor need to create a legitimate entity as a conduit for getting money and programs into Afghanistan. As such, and because NGOs evolved from donors, no

effort was made to identify informal or indigenous groups that might have served as a basis for NGO development. An entity -- designed on Western standards and systems -- was presented and adopted by the Afghans in order to qualify for donor monies (Note: The ongoing war and the fact that a huge refugee population was living in Pakistan made it difficult if not impossible to establish community based NGOs).

The NGOs which grew out of this may be, today, roughly divided into three categories:

1. Former Afghan government line agencies seeking to remain viable;

2. Groups organized on a family, religious, political or regional basis;

3. Independent technical contractors usually engineering or construction oriented.

While there are exceptions within the Afghan NGO community several characteristics typify the Afghan NGO as it exists today.

1. Afghan NGOs are "Donor Driven". What this means is that needs and priorities in Afghanistan are identified, not from communities in Afghanistan or even the Afghans themselves, but by donor agencies according to information they gather about Afghanistan and their funding priorities which are often determined in the West -- at the source of funds.

   Donor priorities can and often do mesh with actual needs identified by communities in Afghanistan. But a process whereby the donor is the primary designator of ***which projects*** should be funded and, ***where*** creates several problems.

   a. NGOs keep "adjusting" their areas of expertise to meet changing donor priorities. For example, if word gets around that donors are funding 'vocational education' or 'women's projects', agencies will change direction simply to qualify for funds. This means that many times a group that does sound work, say irrigation construction, will seek and receive funds for activities for which they have neither the personnel nor the technical capacity to implement.

   b. NGOs keep "adjusting" their geographic areas of operation to meet changing donor priorities. Increased donor interest in Herat and Western Afghanistan, for instance, has led a number of agencies to open sub offices and apply for projects just because that is where

the money is. This may work for those groups which are essentially engineering and construction contractors. It does not, however, encourage an agency to develop ties to and in depth knowledge of a particular region which might facilitate integrated community-based development projects.

c. Because NGOs are donor driven, they have not necessarily developed the capacities to envision their raison d'etre and to go about planning -- either programmatically or financially -- to ensure that future. NGOs have not learned or developed the necessary confidence to "call the shots" to donors.

(There is, of course, a balance to be achieved, but at present, NGOs are spending far too much energy responding to donor interests and not to determining actual needs, setting priorities and building upon their own strengths. For example, in completing the questionnaire, almost all NGOs indicated they identified projects by going directly to the community and talking with elders and leadership, then identifying needs and priorities before going to donors. When asked to elaborate upon this in the interview, the NGOs reported they spent great amounts of time trying to get a "handle on" donor agencies to identify which provinces and areas were receiving priority attention and what kinds of projects were being funded. This latter became the primary factor in project identification.)

2. Afghan NGOs are "Personality Driven", i.e. formed and held together primarily by one or a few single individuals. What this means is that they have tended not to develop as an organization and thus lack the necessary institutionalization and professional depth to survive should they lose key personnel or leadership.

a. Some donors have already recognized this phenomenon and responded accordingly. Donors are increasingly hesitant to fund a single strong leader knowing that should the individual leave the agency, performance will decline. Other donors have responded by funding a known quantity within an agency, say a group of field engineers whose work they deem solid. If these engineers move to another agency, donor funding support goes with them.

b. NGOs that are personality driven are most vulnerable in a climate of diminishing funding simply because they have not sufficiently developed their organizational capacities to sustain themselves in lean times.

3. Afghan NGOs have, out of necessity, taken on the language of Western NGOs without necessarily understanding or accepting the concepts and processes involved. This is most evident in the adopting of: 1) boards of directors; 2) community participation; and 3) accountability to donors and beneficiaries or, what is described in current NGO lingo as "transparency". These concepts, while inherent to Western NGO culture, are often not understood and/or are inimicable to Afghan cultural patterns.

    a. Afghan NGOs are being held accountable for systems that were imposed by donors without being taught, integrated or adapted to the culture in ways that were/might have been mutually acceptable to donors, project implementers, and beneficiaries.

    b. Because the majority of existing "NGO's" are not NGOs, nor should they be, the process of building capacities for long term survival may be misdirected. For example, while planning, budgeting, cost analysis, standards of performance etc. may be necessary for all agencies currently operating, those which are or will become private contractors might benefit from other sorts of small enterprise training and development.

THE DONOR ENVIRONMENT: PAST AND PRESENT

While the tendency is to focus first on the problems of Afghan NGOs, it is incumbent to look as well at the donor environment which led to the present situation; and to the changing conditions in the donor environment which will influence the future of Afghan NGOs.

Donors today are admittedly discouraged, disappointed, often cynical and only beginning to accept the responsibility for ways in which their funding contributed to present problems.

There is no foreseeable end to fighting in Afghanistan. International interest in the country has diminished and in consequence, monies available for relief and rehabilitation are severely reduced. If there can be a positive outcome of a difficult if not unbearable situation for the Afghan people, it is that major donors finally appear to be more willing to talk together, to compare experience and to consider joint or cooperative assistance efforts. In the long run this can only benefit the Afghan people as well as strengthen the aid process in general.

International donors providing "relief and rehabilitation assistance" to Afghanistan met in a common geographical area bringing with them a diversity of political, relief

and rehabilitation agendas which were often conflicting in their intent and in their means of implementation. Depending upon the particular donor or donors, Afghan groups receiving project funds were subject to vastly differing standards of operation and accountability. Two characteristics however, would seem to be common in varying degrees to all international donors:

1. The need to pump money into Afghanistan to prove the donor's own viability;

2. The lack of emphasis on monitoring or evaluating what was being done in terms of its technical quality or its overall social impact on Afghanistan and its people.

WHAT IS RAP'S ROLE IN THE CURRENT ENVIRONMENT?

RAP has two crucial roles it can play in the new funding environment: 1) vis a vis Afghan NGOs; and 2) vis a vis donors.

The RAP process for both should be one that encourages and supports what I call "Supportive Accountability". What this means that the system for enabling NGOs to strengthen their own capacities should not be punitive but learning based. There should, however, be clearly defined standards of operation and accountability for Afghan NGOs which, if not met, mean that funding is stopped. Donors have a right to expect accountability. Funding by "guilt" helps no one. On the other hand, Afghan NGOs need and deserve the opportunity to learn from their mistakes and go beyond.

IDENTIFYING GOOD IMPLEMENTING PARTNERS

The profiling of Afghan NGOs is a first step in the clarification process. As they stand now, the profiles are primarily based upon the questionnaires and a single interview. Information needs to be verified through other donors and RAPs own experience. Information also needs to be updated on a systematic basis so that the Afghan agencies are given fair assessment.

During the process of interviewing, some NGOs proved they had the capacity to respond to critiques from donors and to change their program and implementation. Other agencies improved and/or diminished their capacities by changes in personnel.

Some criteria for assessing and selecting implementing partners did emerge from the interviews and analysis of the questionnaires.

1. RAP should emphasize monitoring as a part of the ongoing selection process. In particular, where a new NGO is being considered, past projects funded by other donors should be investigated on site as well as through interview with the donor.

2. Other criteria for consideration in the selection process:

    a. Evidence of "institutional depth":

        While this could be criticized as an unduly conservative approach to funding, the fact remains that some NGOs fall apart when the director is gone, and/or, when others in the organization have no authority for making decisions in the absence of the director. This should not necessarily be interpreted that only large agencies should be funded.

    b. A tradition of cooperation with other NGOs:

        Collaborative efforts are one measurement of an agency's capacity to network, cooperate and share experience. Participation in such things as the EU/Swedish Committee education and health dialogue, and ACBAR activities should be noted. In this same vein, it is well worth following the progress of the two umbrella NGO groups that have emerged in Peshawar.

    c. Project evaluation by other donors:

        Even when donors had differing objectives and standards, remarkable consistencies in evaluation of NGOs began to emerge in the donor interview process.

    d. Evidence of the capacity to learn from mistakes and to respond by changing organizationally:

        There were several clear instances where NGOs having had negative project monitoring reports, financial audits or personnel problems responded to critiques and make significant changes in their operations. This should be noted.

3. For RAP and all donors, it is wise to be wary of NGO evaluations based upon personal "comfort levels". This occurs with particular groups whose

leadership has language facility, a master of Western cultural nuances and/or skills acquired abroad which allow for easy exchange of information. This is particularly true of NGO's that are direct offspring of international donors. These groups should be subject to the same standards of accountability and evaluation as all others.

Conversely, a lack of the language facility and understandable "style" by Western standards, does not necessarily indicate that an NGO is unable to operate and implement projects effectively. While this sort of assessment is particularly difficult and subjective, it is important to identify as many measurable indicators as possible upon which to base NGO evaluations.

RAP INTERNAL SYSTEMS FOR SUPPORTING AFGHAN NGOs

In terms of providing direct support to Afghan NGOs, two critical departments within RAP should receive priority attention in terms of funding and personnel:

1. The monitoring division which should be headed by an expatriate. This is sensible because RAP is a donor and the donor must be represented in the process.

2. The training division which a) supports monitoring through on site training to address technical and social issues identified by monitoring; and b) provides training to improve the institutional capacities of the agencies supported by RAP.

If the following are not already in place, the monitoring division should consider developing:

1. Clearly articulated written standards and procedures for evaluation which are shared freely with project implementers as well as with other donors.

2. A system which allows for "on the spot feedback" with project personnel; and immediate response to situations that cannot be remedied on site. That may mean cutting funds, or stopping the project altogether. (This requires that a response procedure be developed so that monitoring powers cannot be abused).

3. In line with the above, monitoring should have a training capability for addressing some problems immediately on site thus encouraging learning through problem solving, by cause and effect and logical

consequences. For example, if an erosion barrier has been poorly constructed or not effective as designed, often the response is to simply withhold payment until it is technically corrected. On the spot feedback which focuses not only on the technical aspects of the construction, but also on the consequences of poor work for the agency and the larger community has the potential for a learning opportunity and for more enduring impact.

4. A system for sharing monitoring information with other donors. Numerous Afghan agencies have learned quickly that donors do not necessarily compare experience. While the reasons are many, the end result is that Afghan NGOs recognize they can survive bad performances and still successfully survive.

5. A system of checks and balances on itself to encourage openness in the monitoring and nurturing an atmosphere of fairness among monitors.

Results of questionnaires and interviews with Afghan NGOs revealed that few had the capacity for organizational and technical self assessment. This lack is partially the result of being donor directed and driven, and partially of simply having little experience as a business or an NGO.

RAP needs to address the reality that not all Afghan NGOs are not NGOs, but agencies, private and public with particular technical capacities. All of them however, can benefit from improving their systems of reporting, accountability, long range and strategic planning, financial planning, etc.

A first cut needs to be made to determine and classify Afghan NGOs based on their potential to become more community based and responsive; to be private business contractors; or to move into government when the time comes. A commitment by RAP to developing a pool of talent to move into line agencies, operate NGOs and private businesses will serve Afghanistan's future.

While training for the above is often overlapping, some classification will enable RAP Training Division to better tailor courses to meet agency needs.

For those agencies -- and there are some which seem to have greater potential for moving toward a community based operation -- this is the time to initiate a limited pilot project, say for two or three agencies on Participatory Rural Appraisal or a similar approach. It is necessary, however, that donor support for the activity be insured so that the process is not abandoned.

If not already planned or in place, the Training Division might consider focussing on:

1. Field based technical training to support monitoring;

2. A comprehensive training course of several components beginning with organizational self assessment and classification and moving to: long range and strategic planning that includes program and fiscal planning; program design for donor independence; and finally, as the last part, proposal development;

3. A program in Participatory Rural Appraisal first, for a select pilot project; then an open course for those interested;

4. Developing a "trouble shooting team" which can -- by NGO request go into an agency to assess a problem, propose possible solutions, and facilitate problem solving.

RAP SUPPORT TO DONORS

RAP can play a critical role with donors, perhaps the most important of which is to encourage and support "Donor Transparency". How RAP shares and receives information on NGOs will be an important modeling for the process. In this direction, RAP can:

1. Encourage and support dialogue among donors to:

    a. Evaluate their experiences in Afghan relief, rehabilitation and development activities both with relation to their own role and responsibilities and their role and responsibilities to Afghan NGOs.

    b. Discuss individual funding priorities to identify areas of common philosophy and agreement; as well as areas to agree to disagree;

    c. Engage in coordination and cooperative ventures. The EU dialogue on education facilitated by Swedish Committee is a prime example of possibilities in this area as well as support for and active involvement in similar sorts of ACBAR sponsored activities.

2. Educate donors about the RAP process. The NGO "incubator" direction in which RAP is moving is a good one; but donors need education about the concept and process. RAP needs to market what they are doing and why it is important.

    a. A "marketing document" for donors and grantees -- brief and concise would be worth the time and effort.

    b. RAP senior staff needs to make a concerted effort to "Network" among the donor community, asking questions, sharing its experience, selling its product.

3. A more difficult task for RAP, but one worth engaging is that of facilitating dialogue among donors to evaluate past experience and build upon that accumulated knowledge to define and direct funding priorities. RAP is in a difficult position as both a donor and a recipient of funds. As a donor to Afghan NGOs with a clear philosophy for funding, it nonetheless remains subject to the prevailing whims and priorities of those powers that administer and fund RAP.

CONCLUSION

Past experience has shown that pumping money thorough a system has not necessarily lead to successful relief, rehabilitation or development in Afghanistan. Neither does the proliferation of Afghan NGOs indicate institutional success. In spite of that knowledge, donors, and particularly PVOs seem inclined to repeat the mistakes of very recent history.

This is the time to slow down the funding process, to encourage dialogue not only among donors but also the Afghan NGOs, to put into place systems of accountability that are understood by both donors and NGOs; and to support cooperative ventures among the various Afghan agencies which will lead to Afghans taking control of their own destinies.

In the long term, no donor can finally control the direction and outcome of the various groups known as Afghan NGOs. The final opportunity for rehabilitation and development of Afghanistan is, as it should be, in the hands of the Afghan people.

RAP can, however, contribute to strengthening the pool of leadership, management capability, and technical capacities for Afghanistan by:

1. Establishing and maintaining standards of performance and accountability;

2. Encouraging dialogue and communication -- Transparency -- among both donors and Afghan NGOs;

3. Providing ongoing quality monitoring and training for those groups meeting basic standards of performance and accountability.

Afghan NGOs and their related project personnel can be supported effectively. Whether the people end up in NGOs, in Government Ministries, or as private business persons, capabilities developed though the processes of setting standards, requiring accountability, and encouraging community responsibility will benefit Afghanistan.

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Attachments: Scope of Work
Project Summary